

# Student Attitudes Toward the Use of WebCT Blogs for English Writing Assignments

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The survey described in this paper was undertaken as action research to find out how students have felt about using the 'Discussions' function of WebCT for writing assignments in my university English classes. The results show that the majority of students responded positively to its use, and were motivated by being able to see each other's work.

In the age of Social Networking Services (SNSs) and blogs, writing has become a more personal and interactive form of communication, with the vast majority of writing now taking place on computers and online. The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) writing has started to include the use of blogs, online forums and SNSs in order to take advantage of the unique interactive capabilities of these media. Soon after I began teaching at Ritsumeikan University in 2008, I taught myself about the university's Learning Management System (LMS), WebCT, and began using it in my classes. WebCT has a range of functions which I used extensively in my courses, including a 'Discussions' function which allows students to read each other's work and leave comments. The survey described in this paper was undertaken as action research to find out how students felt about using the 'Discussions' function of WebCT for their writing assignments in my classes.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The survey was conducted with students from English classes in the Ritsumeikan University Department of Business Administration between 2010 and 2012. These classes included first-year courses which required students to write three genre-based academic paragraphs, and second-year courses which involved writing an essay. Participants were all Business Administration students with pre-intermediate to advanced levels of English, with the majority being lower-intermediate (equivalent to a CEFR B1 level). There were 330 responses collected.

### Implementation of the written assignments on WebCT

In their first semester of first year, all students are required to take an introductory Communication and Writing course (CW1) which introduces them to academic paragraph writing. They must write three assessed paragraphs in different genres, which were all done using WebCT, an LMS related to Blackboard and functionally similar. The basic writing process for the students

was for them to first brainstorm and outline their paragraph in class, and then submit a draft to WebCT for homework. I would then print out and write feedback on a paper copy of their work to show them in the following class. They would copy my advice to their own paper copy (to ensure it was given due attention), and students would then submit a final version of their work to WebCT which had been edited, based on my feedback. For this submission I also set as homework the writing of three comments to other students, to make sure that not only did all students pay some attention to the work of others, but also that they received some response to their final work from their peers.

For all classes other than the CW1 course, the written component required was a genre-based essay. This was done as a process, with body paragraphs written first and then introductions and conclusions added, and then submitted on WebCT with feedback given in class each time. This meant that students could see examples from their peers throughout the essay-writing process.

### **The instrument**

A 5-point Likert scale survey, consisting of 4 items (1-4) was carried out using WebCT. A final following open-ended question (5) was posed to allow students to express any further opinions they might have regarding the use of WebCT to carry out written assignments:

#### *Survey items*

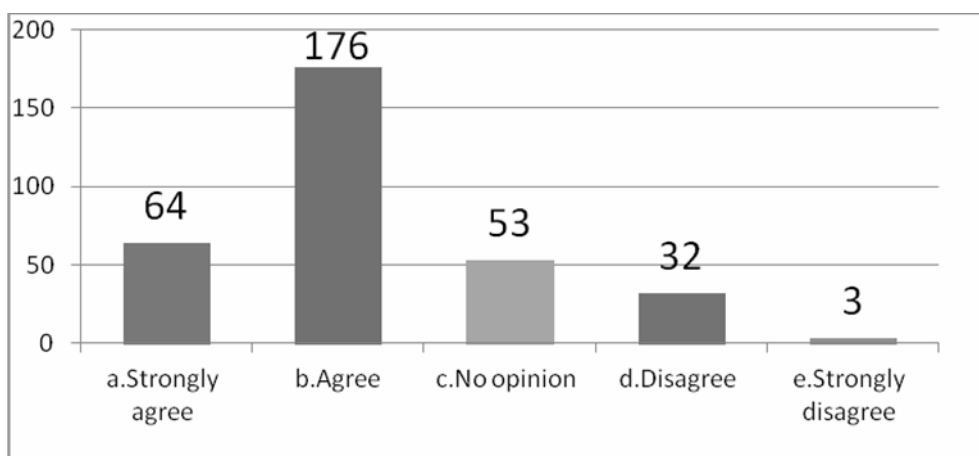
- 1) I liked doing writing assignments on the WebCT blog more than writing on paper.*
- 2) I liked other people reading my writing.*
- 3) Knowing that people would read my writing motivated me to try to write well.*
- 4) Reading others' entries was useful for my writing.*
- 5) Do you have any suggestions or comments about blog assignments?*

### **RESULTS OF THE SURVEY**

*1) "I liked doing writing assignments on the WebCT blog more than writing on paper."*

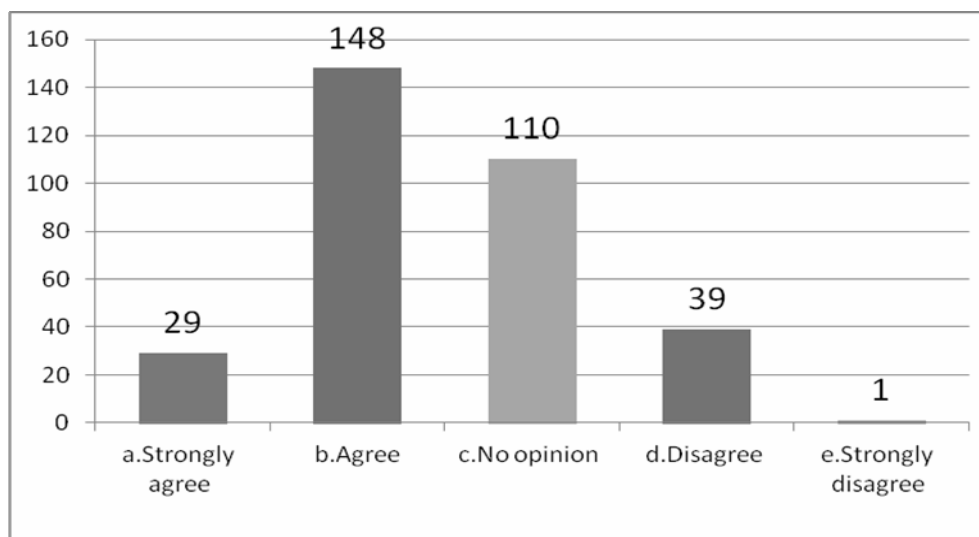
As has been found in other studies regarding ESL student attitudes to writing online (Bakar, 2010), the students' response was generally very positive. This question does not specify reasons for preference, but a number of clues can be seen in responses to subsequent questions and in the free comments discussed later. It is possible that negative responses are based more on practical concerns mentioned in the open responses to question 5, such as meeting the earlier deadline, and problems with internet or site access, rather than the manner of exposure and interaction that WebCT brings to writing assignments.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Showing Number of Participants per Likert Scale Response**



2) *"I liked other people reading my writing."*

**FIGURE 2**  
**Showing Number of Participants per Likert Scale Response**



One of the main differences between a paper-based approach versus a WebCT blog-based approach is that on WebCT it is possible to see other students' writing (whether student posts are viewable by other students or not can be set by the teacher, but I considered this to be the main advantage of using

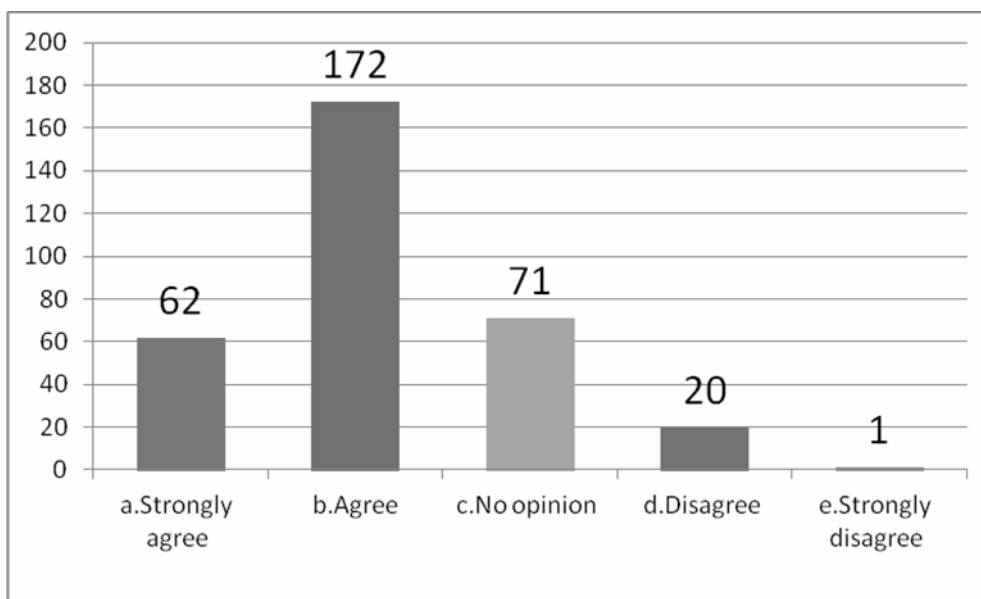
this medium.) In terms of privacy, as students know their work will be viewable by their classmates, they can choose to write on topics that do not disclose information of a private nature. Teachers should be careful to set suitably broad topics so as to not require students to reluctantly share personal information. For example, for a compare/contrast paragraph assignment topic, students were asked to write a paragraph comparing two people; they could write about personal relationships such as friends or family, or people they did not know personally such as historical figures or other famous people.

Importantly, students can make comments on WebCT to others posts, which is motivating for the student writers. Rather than just having the teacher read their work, they are able to communicate with their peers and receive comments back from them. This has also been found to be a strong motivator in other studies carried out on this topic (Ghandoura, 2012).

We can see that only one student out of 330 strongly disagreed that they liked people reading their writing. For such students it would be possible to arrange alternative means of submission, if necessary.

3) *“Knowing that people would read my writing motivated me to try to write well.”*

**FIGURE 3**  
**Showing Number of Participants per Likert Scale Response**



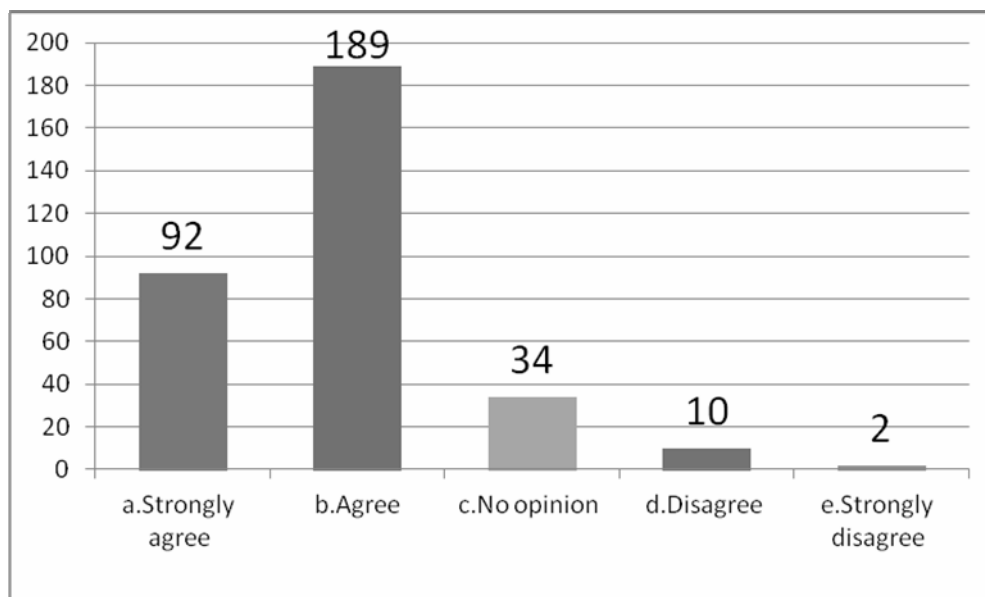
While 54% of students responded in agreement to question 2, 72% have responded in agreement to this item, demonstrating that having their work

exposed to peer observation had some positive effects in getting students to put more effort into their writing. Making students' work viewable to their peers can encourage them to take more care in their work regarding writing mechanics, style and content.

Motivation can be of a different nature for different students. Confident students may take pride in their work and try to write in a particularly interesting or creative way, to express themselves and impress their peers. Lower-level students may take extra care to write to the best of their ability so as not to be embarrassed by having their work seen by peers. Lazier students, who may normally make just enough effort for a passing mark, may try a little harder due to peer scrutiny rather than simply writing for their teacher.

4) *"Reading others' entries was useful for my writing."*

**FIGURE 4**  
**Showing Number of Participants per Likert Scale Response**



The data in Figure 4 showed the most positive feedback from students regarding the use of WebCT for written assignments. Providing models for written assignments is extremely important, and WebCT allows us to provide many more models than we would normally be able to show in a traditional writing classroom. Confident and capable students often submit posts first, which serve as good models for the later students. With WebCT, more reticent students can even see their peers work before starting their assignment, if they are not sure of the assignment topic or appropriate format, etc.

## DISCUSSION

Being able to share work widely across the class has a social function of ‘ice-breaking’, so students can learn about each other’s backgrounds and interests through their writing. This can also provide a basis for students to get to know each other more in person.

As peers of the same age in the same university context, they often write about similar experiences, which means that they provide each other with relevant and useful language to communicate about such topics. Their natural interest in their peers makes them a receptive audience, more open to acquiring the language used in the writing task.

Although there are many benefits, there are some possible negative consequences of open access to each other’s work. Firstly, some students can be tempted to copy very literally from classmates who have submitted early, rather than making the effort to come up with their own forms of expression. To avoid this, it is advisable to have brainstorming and outlining sessions in class so the students have already started to shape and express their ideas long before seeing the drafts of their peers.

Another concern with seeing peer models is that students could adopt the mistakes of others. This is possible, but this concern should be far outweighed by the by the benefits of the correct language models displayed, and teachers should make a point of reviewing any widespread errors as a class. If desired, it would be possible to make the draft version private, and only share the final version, which would have had the benefit of being edited by the student after teacher feedback and would therefore probably be much more grammatically accurate.

### Open comments about using WebCT

These comments were optional and the majority of students chose not to respond. However, out of all comments from students, there were 45 that could be considered positive and only 9 negative.

The positive comments almost always referred to being able to read their classmates’ work, and how this was useful for their own writing:

- *It is useful for my writing. Because I can learn writing technique from other assignments.*
- *I really liked reading other's entries because there are lots of expressions and ideas I didn't know!!*
- *I think it is a good idea. I could get some clues to improve my essay by reading others.*

Other comments indicated appreciation of the function of being able to read others’ work due to their interest in the content:

- *Yes, I did. I interested in classmate’s assignments. Their passage is very interesting.*
- *I think that is good idea because I can see opinions of some friends.*
- *I got inspiration from essay of other students.*

Some other benefits were also acknowledged:

- *I like writing on paper but Reading others' entries and knowing that people would read my writing gave good influence for me.*
- *I think this system helps me finish assignment before deadline, so this system is good for me.*

Rather than relating to the writing process, most of the negative comments related to the earlier deadline, and several were concerned with potential difficulties with technology.

- *I don't want to submit assignments on WebCT because it make me upset for the deadline.*
- *I missed the deadline sometimes, so I prefer writing on the paper.*
- *I think that you shouldn't close student's assignments by Tuesday 10p.m, because we are very busy for another class homework and part-time job.*
- *If our computer freezes we can't hand out our assignments, so last day is dangerous*
- *Sometimes it been error and I prefer more to write in paper.*
- *I afraid of Internet problem.*

#### **Advantages for teachers in using WebCT**

In addition to the benefits described for students, it has been recognized that there are also many advantages for teachers in using online submission systems for writing (Johnson, 2004). With particular reference to using the 'Discussions' function of WebCT for writing assignments, they include the following:

*Record-keeping and portfolio* - Having students' written work on WebCT is a convenient way to keep a portfolio of it that can be referred to easily. Drafts can be compared to final versions, and first assignments compared to end-of-semester assignments to gauge student improvement and effort.

*Pedagogical examples* - Having all the student work available in one place as data can serve as a kind of corpus from which it is easy to find patterns of common mistakes which can be the basis for review sessions.

*A faster cycle of assignment handling* - Traditionally, students hand in work in class then wait a week until the following class for the teacher to bring back the marked assignments. Alternatively, students bring work to class and the teacher gives feedback on-the-spot, which can be rather frantic in a large class. By getting students to hand in the work in advance before the next class, the teacher can speed up the cycle of feedback. This allows for good feedback on the students' work during class after it has been handed in on WebCT and while it is still fresh in their minds. The teacher also gets an overview of student work and can therefore prepare for in-class group feedback sessions. In addition, this system requires students to submit their work one or two days before the next class in order to give the teacher adequate time to mark. This is often not

popular with students, but can have the positive effect of reducing the amount of assignments done in a last-minute rush just before class.

*Convenience of file organization* - It is of course possible to have students submit their assignments by email as attached documents, but it can be very time-consuming and confusing to deal with the document files of many students, and to print them out individually. With WebCT, you can print out all of the student entries for a particular assignment. For my purposes of giving feedback I also spent about 5-10 minutes reformatting a classes' submissions prior to printing, to allow more space for corrections.

*Wider feedback* - As the other students are also commenting on student work, it is not solely the task of the teacher to provide comments on content, but becomes a task shared amongst the class. This may naturally result in students getting more genuine, insightful and enthusiastic comments about their assignment content from their peers.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, these results indicate that there are a range of benefits for both students and teachers in using WebCT for writing assignments. The survey confirmed that students generally felt positively about its use, and found that having an audience of their peers motivated them to improve their writing. For teachers, various practical advantages for organization and preparation of classes have been described. Hopefully this survey will serve as a useful indicator to other teachers, in a similar context, as to the likely student response and possible benefits, and will inspire them to make the initial effort necessary to become familiar with the WebCT system.



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